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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 001903

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [MARR](#) [AF](#) [CA](#)
SUBJECT: NEW CANADIAN PANEL TO REVIEW AFGHAN OPTIONS;
WELCOMES INPUT FROM PARTNERS

Classified By: PolMinCouns Scott Bellard, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) Prime Minister Stephen Harper in a mid-morning press conference on October 12 announced the formation of a new "Independent Advisory Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan." He emphasized that he expects the panel to "provide expert non-partisan advice that will help parliamentarians make our decision" about the mission for Canada beyond February 2009. The new panel includes former Liberal Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister John Manley, former federal Cabinet Minister Jake Epp, former Clerk of the Privy Council Paul Tellier, former Canadian Ambassador to the United States Derek Burney, and former broadcaster and former Canadian Consul General in New York City Pamela Wallin. He requested that the panel report back to him by the end of January 2008.

¶2. (U) PM Harper tasked the panel to examine four main options, while explicitly noting that it would be free to offer others or any combination thereof, including:
-- continue training the Afghan army and police so Canada can begin withdrawing its forces in February 2009;
-- focus on reconstruction and have forces from another country/countries take over security in Kandahar;
-- shift Canadian security and reconstruction effort to another region in Afghanistan; or,
-- withdraw all Canadian military after February 2009 except a small contingent to provide security for remaining aid workers and diplomats.

¶3. (U) Harper explicitly urged the panel to "respect the sacrifices" Canadians have made to date in Afghanistan and to keep in mind the "risk of a return to chaos," the "potential regional and international implications," Canada's "obligations to the United Nations and our NATO allies," and the "implications for Canada's international reputation."

¶4. (C) Associate Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs for Inter-government coordination on Afghanistan David Mulroney later privately briefed senior diplomats from the UK, the Netherlands, Australia, and the U.S. He apologized for the lack of prior notice, emphasizing that the decision to form the panel had been very close-hold; the Canadians had not even informed the Afghan government until just before the announcement. Foreign Minister Bernier did not raise during his October 6-7 visit to Kabul and Kandahar. Mulroney said that the government viewed the group as a "panel of wise persons" who will offer their own advice rather than "take the pulse of Canadians" or judge what was politically feasible. He stressed that the Prime Minister does not so much expect the panel to help shape a consensus position on the future role as to offer constructive ideas about the best use of Canadian resources. However, the panel will hold some meetings both throughout the country and in Afghanistan over the next month or so, and will probably also stop at NATO headquarters in Brussels. He added that the group would

welcome an opportunity to hear the views of senior policymakers from the UK, Australia, the Netherlands, and the U.S., either in Ottawa or by videoconference, as there was likely not enough time to travel to our capitals. He suggested SCA A/S Boucher as one possible interlocutor.

15. (C) Mulroney emphasized that, from the point of view of the government, "no idea is off the table." He suggested, for example, that even a withdrawal as contemplated in the first option could be linked to benchmarks rather than follow an automatic timetable. He commented that it was increasingly evident to the Government of Canada that there is a need to set "clear expectations" of the Afghan government's responsibilities in charting a future course, as the Canadians and others try to "work themselves out of a job" in Afghanistan. He admitted that the government would not be "bound" by the advice of the panel, but would definitely welcome its insights and recommendations. He noted that he expected that its work would continue whether or not there is an election in Canada over the next few months. He expressed relief that in the political debate in Canada, at least no one had questioned the "moral grounds" for the existing Canadian mission in Afghanistan.

16. (C) Action request: Embassy believes that an opportunity -- preferably in person, but by videoconference if need be -- for senior USG representatives from State and DOD to discuss future courses of action with the panel would be highly worthwhile. The timetable is likely to be within the next two-four weeks. Please advise of interest and availability. End action request

17. (C) Comment: This move should help to dispel some of the partisan nature of the discussion once Parliament

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reconvenes on October 16, and also take pressure off the Prime Minister to provide an explicit way forward on Afghanistan in his Speech to the Throne.

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